

Woman sentenced in baby's shaking death

By SCOTT NORTH
Herald Writer

Dale Slater stood just feet away from his child's killer Tuesday, but his thoughts seemed focused on love.

He scarcely looked at Sheri T. Reiser, 39, the Bothell-area day-care operator who pleaded guilty to first-degree manslaughter in the March 31 abuse death of Slater's 6-month-old son, Nathan.

Instead, Slater stood in Snohomish County Superior Court and spoke to the spirit of his slain child, the blue-eyed baby boy he and other family members now call "our angel."

He talked about his pride at being the child's father and the horror of holding the boy to his chest as first life, and then warmth, drained from his small body.

"Son," Slater said, "don't ever hold so much hate in your heart that you lose sight of why we choose to love in the first place."

The Everett man's comments came moments before Judge Ellen Fair sentenced Reiser to 8 1/2 years in prison for what she called a "completely senseless but very deliberate act."

The "crime that never should have happened" deserved the maximum punishment under state sentencing guidelines, the judge ruled.

The boy was at Reiser's in-home child-care center when he stopped breathing. An autopsy showed bleeding in his brain. Experts were prepared to testify the child was violently shaken, causing the small blood vessels in his head to break and leak blood.

As part of her guilty plea, Reiser admitted to getting "anxious" because Nathan was crying and to "recklessly" bouncing his head against her knee.

Although prosecutors accepted Reiser's plea as factual, they also made it clear they believed the evidence showed more mistreatment than she admitted. She'd previously admitted to police that she'd "slammed" the boy on her knee and had "tossed" the child into a crib.

The result was tragic, Fair said.

She listened as the boy's mother, Tammie, talked about what it was like to dress her son for the last time before his funeral, how she placed a baseball cap on the boy's small head to hide incisions from the autopsy.

The boy was too small to run away from Reiser, who apparently was driven to take his life because of his crying, Tammie Slater said.

"Nathan was doing what God gave him, and it cost him his life," she said.

Reiser offered a tearful, halting apology.

"I wish I could take back the day," she said.

Reiser's attorney, Jan Olson of Seattle, said there were "bitter ironies" in the case because his client had no history of legal problems, no complaints about her day care and had dedicated herself to caring for children.

She did not intend the boy's death, he said.

Nathan's family and their friends wore matching T-shirts at the sentencing hearing. The shirts featured the slain boy's photograph and offered advice for preventing more deaths and injuries to children because of shaken baby syndrome.

"Never, never, never, never shake a baby," the shirts read.

**You can call Herald Writer Scott North at 425-339-3431
or send e-mail to north@heraldnet.com.**